



Disparities among people with disabilities in the media: A content analysis

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STRANGER THINGS

Introduction

Since television's inception, people that are disabled have been underrepresented and misrepresented in the media. According to the Disability Statistics Annual Report, 12.8% of Americans are disabled (Kraus et al., 2018), yet that number is often not reflected in the amount of people with disabilities that appear in the media. Additionally, people who are disabled in the media are often poorly portrayed; typically, people with disabilities are viewed as asexual, physically unattractive, and weak in comparison to people without disability (Nario-Redmond, 2010). Moreover, certain stigmas are also tied to gender. Some traits typically related to masculinity are antisocial personality disorder, addictions, and paraphilias while traits linked to femininity include eating disorders, histrionic personality disorder, and body dysmorphia (Boysen, Ebersole, Casner, & Coston, 2014). The goal of this study is to examine the top viewed shows from the most popular networks and see how frequently they include people with disabilities and how those people are portrayed.

Method

Sample

- 60 random episodes from the top 10 viewed shows from ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox (Schneider, 2018), as well as Netflix and Hulu originals (). We excluded programs that were special events (one-time documentaries, football, specials). 4 episodes were missing/had errors in encoding, so 56 were included in this study. Our class of 15 students split into pairs and divided the episodes up equally.

Variables

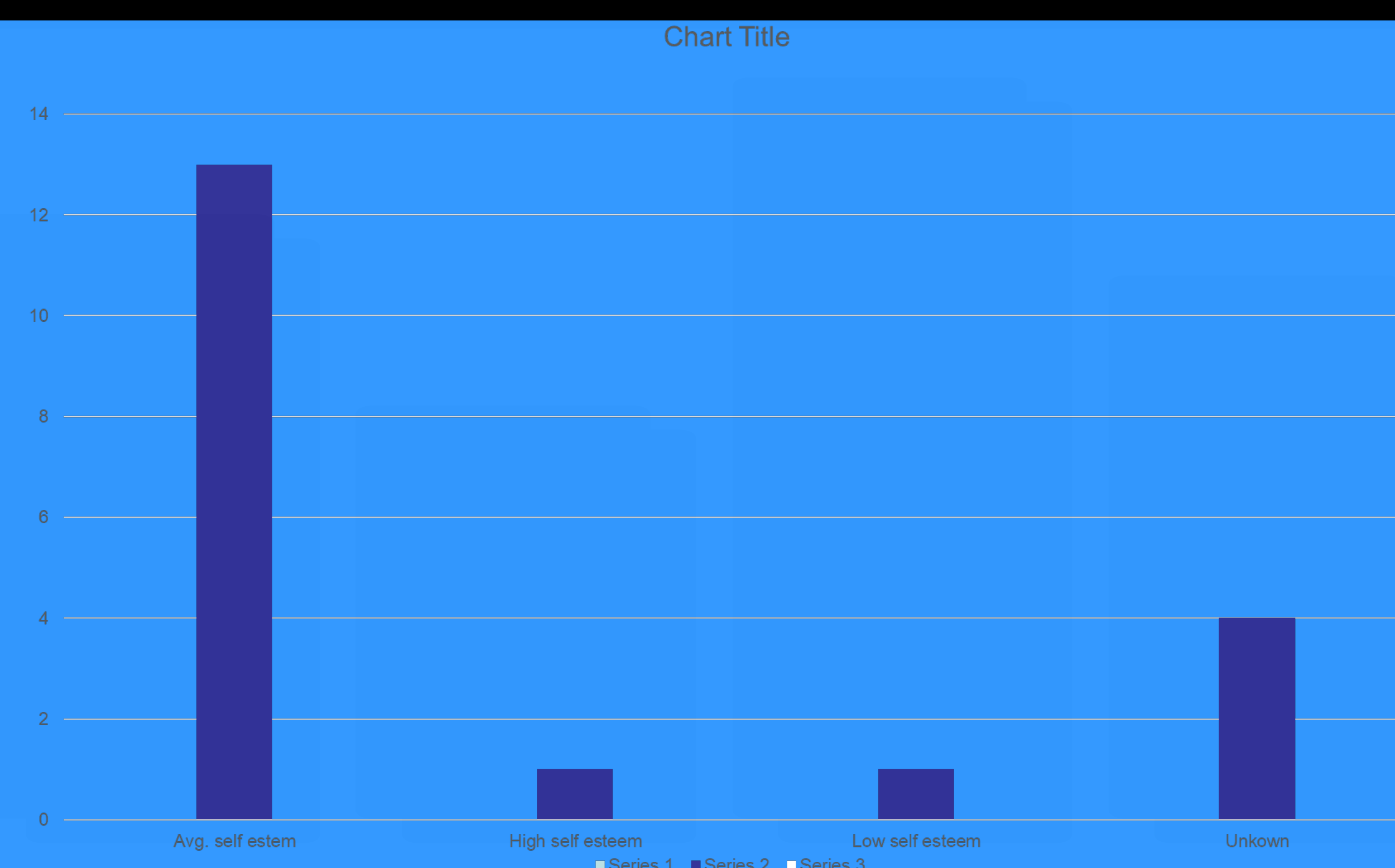
- We looked at 38 different variables, encompassing various aspects of the characters. For a character to be counted as being in the episode they had to have had at least one speaking role. For a character to be coded they had to have a physical disability that limits their movement/sensory ability or an intellectual disability that limits their cognitive functioning/adaptive ability. Some variables we looked at were demographic information, financial status, and relationship quality. I in particular wanted to look at the perceived self-image of these characters.

Coding

- Prior to our data collection, as a class we went through 3 weeks of training to work on our coding skills so that we would be cohesive as a class and as accurate as possible. While coding, we looked at a code book that operationally defined each variable we were examining. We were assigned partners and viewed our assigned episodes in pairs and if there was a disagreement on any variable, we discussed the issue, came to a solution, marked it.

Results

- There were a total of 1060 speaking characters, only 20 had a disability (15 physical, 5 intellectual, 1.89% of people in shows compared to 12.8 in real life)
- 14 were male and 6 were female.
- 17 were Caucasian.
- 11 had a condition that was permanent
- 9 required an assistive device
- 13 had an average self-image, 1 had a high self-image, 1 had a low self-image, and 4 were unknown
- 3 were single, 4 were in a relationship, and 10 were unknown
- As a class we had over 80% agreement on all variables, indicating that our encoding skills were consistent.



Discussion

- As we expected, people with disabilities are very underrepresented in the media.
- A majority of people who were disabled had an average self-image, which is a positive finding.
- Ways to improve our research for future studies:
 - We could view older shows to see if these finding remain true for then, or if they have improved to some degree.
 - We could expand on what networks or genres we looked at.
 - View other media than just the top 10 most popular shows

References

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